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ABSTRACT

In many college and high school forensics tournaments, the topic agenda is derived from "Newsweek," "Time," and "U.S. News and World Report." This use of three profit-oriented, widely circulated magazines as the agenda setting basis of extemporaneous speaking competition is philosophically and substantively damaging. First, using news information from three homogenous sources is inconsistent with forensics' focus on a variety of contexts and audiences. Other sources, such as the "National Review," "American Opinion," or major metropolitan newspapers should be considered. Philosophically, the use of weekly news magazines diminishes the value of forensics by providing an "easy out" for the student. Substantively, the use of such magazines encourages well-polished speakers to limit needlessly their horizons of thought. Extemporaneous speaking should be a tremendously broad forum but generally is not. It is time for alternatives, and the only limitation to developing them is the creativity of tournament directors. (DF)

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NEWS INFORMATION IN FORENSICS: A CASE FOR A MORE INTELLIGENT USE OF SOURCES

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Abstract of:
NEWS INFORMATION IN FORENSICS: A CASE
FOR A MORE INTELLIGENT USE OF SOURCES

It is the general position of this paper that contemporary forensics suffers from a constant risk of intolerance of many ideas and ideologies. This position is developed in the specific thesis that the use of three profit-oriented, widely circulated magazines as the agenda setting basis of extemporaneous speaking competition is philosophically and substantively damaging. The thesis of the essay is developed in three parts: (1) a discussion of weekly newsmagazines and alternative sources, (2) an examination of the harm of narrow perspectives, and (3) the potential for using alternative sources.

NEWS INFORMATION IN FORENSICS: A CASE FOR A MORE INTELLIGENT USE OF SOURCES

> Forensics activities, including debate and individual events, are laboratories for helping students to understand and communicate various forms of argument more effectively in a variety of contexts with a variety of audiences.[1]

The definitional statement of the National Development Conference on Forensics in 1975 was, if anything, praise to the value of broad experience and the open mind. As an educational activity forensics seeks to promote better understanding and to avoid one-sided perspectives that limit knowledge of the world. Better understanding is requisite to better communication, thus forensics competition must be based on a commitment to tolerant, multi-perspective analyses.

It is the position of this paper that forensics constantly risks intolerance of many ideas and ideologies. The greatest value of academic activity is its potential for promoting thought and expression that is not often accepted in the "real world." Often, progressive change in an intransigent society is possible only because of activity that originated in an academic setting. Yet, it is likely that needless and harmful restrictions on

forensics activity exist in our week-after-week competitions. One example that could be generalized to many forensics events is present in most extemporaneous speaking competitions.

The specific thesis of this paper is that the use of three profit-oriented, widely circulated magazines as the agenda setting basis of extemporaneous speaking competition is philosophically and substantively damaging. In many college tournaments and most high school tournaments, the topic agenda is derived from Time, Newsweek, and U. S. News and World Report. Such an approach is not in the best interests of forensics. This thesis is illustrated in an examination of (1) the function of extemporaneous competition, (2) weekly newsmagazines and alternative sources, (3) the harm of narrow perspectives, and (4) the potential use of alternative sources.

The following is an example of extemporaneous speaking rules for college level competition: "Contestants will be given three topics in the general area of current events, choose one, and have 30 minutes to prepare a speech. Maximum time limit for the speech is 7 minutes."[2] Such a starting point is typical of extemporaneous competitions in the United States. What the average rules description might add is that the current events topics are generally drawn from recent issues of the three major newsweeklies.[3] In preparing a competition an event director often scans the news magazines and selects questions based on their agendas and emphasis of coverage on particular stories.

Some people might consider Time, Newsweek, and U. S. News and

World Report to be the best journalistic syntheses of each week's domestic and international events. Others have sarcastically referred to the three as "slime, newsreek, and U. S. news and world distort." Regardless of how one feels about newsweekly journalism, it should be apparent that encouraging news information from three homogenous sources is inconsistent with forensics' focus on a variety of contexts and audiences. Just how significant is the restriction? To answer the question one must examine some specific examples of news coverage. As Hess explained, "when a journalist would have us believe that one angle of a news event is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, we allow ourselves to be deceived."[4] A brief comparison illustrates the point.

Covering an international meeting held in Havana in 1978, Time stated: "Cuban President Fidel Castro used the occasion to denounce, once more, the multifarious evils of U. S. imperialism." Accompanying the description was a photograph of Castro captioned "hot air and narcolepsy."[5] A report of the same event in Prensa Latina said:

> Representatives of Latin America and the Caribbean were concentrated, for the most part, in the area of El Vedado. . .various delegates told the Prensa Latina that the most important and extraordinary aspect. . .was the opportunity of sharing directly with the people of Havana.[6]

Is Time's account more objective? Time focused on a Castro accu-

sation that may or may not have been warranted, and its caption was pure adhominem. Prensa Latina's angle was very different and was, at least, objective in its mention of accounts of the delegates themselves.

A more recent example concerns the alleged capitalization of the communist world, a favorite topic for a time at tournaments. Implying that capitalism is a more workable system than socialism, U. S. News wrote on February 4, 1985: "From the rice fields and restaurants of China to the botiques of Hungary and the factories of Yugoslavia, a revolution is brewing in the communist world--a free enterprise revolution."[7] An article a few months before in Commentary painted a less rosy picture of capitalism, though. Revel's "Can the Democracies Survive?" saw the economic and social question in a very different manner, implying that the capitalist model was in trouble.[8] A source such as National Review might offer a perspective unlike either of the above.

Another instance of newsweekly bias made print in Newsweek's August 20, 1984 description of the XXIII Olympic Games. The magazine asserted:

> . . .it turns out that this was not just a Hollywood epic, bright and gaudy and doomed to fade after a limited run. . .When the athletes of the world finally elbowed their way into the act, the surprise of the spirit was complete.[9]

Were the games of Los Angeles apple pie or rough and tumble politics? Nation might have displayed better insight into the

games when it wrote:

> The great powers have always recognized that they can send signals in cultural vehicles that they could not transmit in political ones. There are a lot of bad messages traveling, and they all cry danger.[10]

One journalist's patriotism is another's jingoism. Perhaps a third source, such as American Opinion, would have considered the games a "dangerous acceptance of evil ideologies." An extemporaneous speaker on any level should be encouraged to know the entire ideological spectrum of a political issue.

Besides giving news accounts, journalistic sources set agendas. A simple example can illustrate this function. A war rages in tiny El Salvador and lends itself to relatively simple information gathering because of the extremely concentrated fighting. Big media covers the story. Meanwhile, fighting is intense in Guatemala, a country of much greater strategic importance to the U. S. than El Salvador. However, the terrain is rough, the guerrilla war is dispersed, and information gathering is inhibited. Just as the C. I. A. and K. G. B. are aware of what conflicts are important, so are many news sources of various ideologies. But Time, Newsweek, and U. S. News and World Report are limited to flashy, easy-to-cover stories ("flash and trash" as they are known to some reporters). The speakers who rely on the three magazines are ignorant of one of the most vital strategic conflicts in the hemisphere.

(5)

These narrow news perspectives are damaging. In 1975 the National Development Conference on Forensics stated: "competition among ideas and among people has a significant positive role to play in forensics activities."[11] One would have to be quite limited in outlook to defend Time, Newsweek, and U. S. News as representative of "competition among ideas." The use of the three newsweeklies has great impact on the activity and the student. First, extemporaneous speaking topics are inadvertantly limited to issues as viewed by a narrow ideological range. Second, students focus their practice on the very sources most associated with the topic selection. The result restricts speech content and speaker knowledge. Third, competitors are reinforced as being knowledgable about current events, a practice that reduces their incentive to broaden their understanding of the world by consulting alternative news sources. Although the elite national competitors may escape this dependence, the problem is pandemic at most levels of competition.

The dependence on Time, Newsweek, and U. S. News has both philosophical and substantive effect. Philosophically, the newsweekly cult diminishes the value of forensics by imposing an insidious, easy out for the student. Often in college and usually in high school, extemporaneous speaking is subtly directed away from critical thought. Substantively, forensics is encouraging well-polished speakers to needlessly limit their horizons of thought. The capable who compete in forensics should be encouraged to analyze and compare, while avoiding uncritical acceptance

of narrow viewpoints. Not all speakers are so narrowly guided. Many utilize a variety of sources to answer the often-predictable questions. However, current practices incorporate restrictive topic agendas and stimulate little awareness of the multitude of possible alternative sources.

Extemporaneous speaking should be a tremendously broad forum but generally is not. It is time for alternatives, and the only limitation to developing them is the creativity of tournament directors. Extemp files or briefs have been suggested as one possibility to incorporate untapped sources, but these files are flawed: they also suffer from limited dimensions, they do not determine topic agendas, and they encourage memorization at the expense of creative research and analysis. A better start might be to include the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, or the Christian Science Monitor as topic sources. Although this approach would offer only a minor improvement in ideology, it would expand the breadth of analysis. Information in the newspapers (thanks to opinion and editorial pages) is broader, and the newspapers are available in most major libraries. A significant improvement could be realized with the use of less traditional magazines (e. g., Harpers, Nation, National Review, Guardian, Mother Jones, Business Week, etc.). A more desirable and extreme solution would be to utilize some foreign source material printed in English. Tournament directors and forensic associations have the ability to select sources and notify competing schools of

specifics. Alternatives are workable, and even a marginal change to include major newspapers and their editorials would be a tremendous improvement. As longas critical, broad-minded thinking can be stimulated in forensics, it should be. News sources should always be subject to question. As renegade journalist Hunter S. Thompson is fond of saying: "objective journalism is a pompous contradiction in terms."

NOTES

[1] James H. McBath, ed., Forensics as Communication (Skokie, IL: National Textbook Company, 1975), definitional statement.

[2] This description appeared on a number of tournament invitations mailed in 1984.

[3] The author has discussed the agenda setting basis of extemporaneous speaking with a number of forensics directors.

[4] J. Daniel Hess, From the Other's Point of View (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980),225.

[5] Hess 207.

[6] Hess 203.

[7] "The Marxist World: Lure of Capitalism," U. S. News and World Report 4 February 1985: 36.

[8] Jean-Francois Revel, "Can the Democracies Survive?" Commentary June 1984: 19-28.

[9] Pete Axthelm, "Surprises of the Spirit," Newsweek 20 August 1984: 15.

[10] "The Role of the Games," Nation 19 May 1984: 593.

[11] McBath 18.